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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CPAS](#) [CVIS](#) [EINV](#) [OFDP](#) [PINR](#) [SNAR](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: CARIBBEAN POLITICS: AN INSIDER'S VIEW

REF: A. BRIDGETOWN 85

[1](#)B. 05 BRIDGETOWN 1216
[1](#)C. 05 BRIDGETOWN 95

Classified By: Acting DCM Sheila Peters, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Caribbean political campaigns are awash with money from a variety of sources, particularly wealthy expatriates seeking to influence governments, according to regional political consultant Peter Wickham. The availability of money favors ruling parties and has dramatically changed the way campaigns are run, giving inordinate influence to outside consultants, as well as non-nationals and members of the diaspora from whom much of the money is raised. In the extreme, this has allowed an American billionaire to virtually purchase the Government of Antigua and Barbuda. It has also led to special consideration and sweetheart deals for certain regional businesses; in some instances campaign contributors have been rewarded with diplomatic passports. Considering the diminutive size of governments in the Caribbean, a relatively small campaign contribution by U.S. standards promises great benefits for the contributor and, unfortunately, provides increasing opportunities for corruption. End summary.

Money in Politics

[1](#)2. (C) The amount of money spent on political campaigns in the Caribbean has increased with each election, according to Peter Wickham, a consultant who has worked for various governments and political parties throughout the region. With no campaign finance laws or disclosure requirements present in most countries, political parties are free to accept funding from any source, including wealthy expatriates seeking to curry favor for their business and personal interests. The most extreme example is American billionaire Allan Stanford, who has spent millions to virtually buy Antigua and Barbuda by bankrolling either party and providing funding for Government projects. Influence does not have to come at such a high price, however, considering the small size of the countries in the region. A sudden injection of US\$350,000 in the last two weeks of St. Vincent's December 2005 election campaign allowed the ruling Unity Labor Party to sway voters in a handful of hard fought parliamentary races by helping people pay overdue bills, fix leaking roofs, and buy groceries.

[1](#)3. (C) Money has changed the manner in which campaigns are run, with outside consultants such as Wickham having great influence in countries where political decisions used to depend solely on the opinions of local party leaders.

Wickham agreed with the assessment of other observers, who have noted how campaigns once depended on rousing oratory by stump speakers but now feature expensive rallies with musical acts and other entertainment; the political speakers are an annoyance that the audience must endure. Campaigns also rely on in-kind donations from local supporters or members of the diaspora. Shipping containers full of hats, T-shirts, posters and other campaign paraphernalia typically arrive from the U.S. as elections approach. Money also allows parties to fly in supporters from overseas. Wickham believes the ruling party flew about 400 people to St. Vincent from the U.S. for the recent election. Dominica, however, is the major offender with both parties flying in several planeloads of people from the U.S. for its May 2005 election.

Dominica Diplomatic Passports for Sale

¶4. (C) In poor, economically strapped Dominica, well over US\$2 million was spent on the 2005 election campaign, with Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit's ruling Dominica Labor Party (DLP) having the lion's share. Although the opposition charged that China funded the ruling party, most of the money came from wealthy Caribbean expatriates. The Government did not deny, for example, opposition charges that a non-Dominican living in the Cayman Islands provided the ruling DLP with funds in exchange for a diplomatic passport (ref B). According to Wickham, the largest amount of money came from Leroy Parris, Chairman of CLICO Holdings Limited, a Barbados-based insurance and real estate company. The Government rewarded Parris with a particularly friendly business environment and his company will soon finance construction of a new housing development in Dominica. Parris was also named a "Goodwill Ambassador" who will help attract investment to the country.

¶5. (C) Note: The Government of Dominica's interpretation of "Goodwill Ambassador" appears to include real diplomatic status. In September 2005, the Dominica MFA sent Post a diplomatic note requesting that it issue a visa in the diplomatic passport of "Ambassador at Large" Parris. Despite Post's repeated requests for an explanation of the capacity in which Parris, a Barbados citizen, will serve as a Dominica diplomat, the MFA failed to provide an answer. Post recently returned the passport to the MFA without the requested visa. Dominica also continues to have an active economic citizenship program, through which individuals from various countries of concern have previously purchased passports. End note.

Ralph Gonsalves Sure Can Cuss...

¶6. (C) In St. Vincent, Wickham works for Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves's ruling Unity Labor Party (ULP), where the PM was closely involved in planning the recent campaign and personally reviewed each opinion poll and discussed the results with his advisors. Wickham is impressed with Gonsalves's intelligence and attention to detail, although the PM can get too involved in minutia and is often openly critical of those around him. "When you have been cussed out by Ralph you have really been cussed at," said Wickham. He does not believe that voting irregularities allowed the ruling ULP to win three closely contested parliamentary seats in the December election, as the opposition has claimed (ref A). Instead, Wickham is of the opinion that it was the aforementioned infusion of cash and flying in of voters that allowed the ruling party to win the three races his polling showed they could very well have lost.

...But Not at Marijuana Growers

¶7. (C) Marijuana growers have considerable influence in St. Vincent, where they are not necessarily considered

undesirables but can be quite prominent people, according to Wickham. He thinks there is some truth to the rumors that that certain individuals tied to the drug trade provided funding to Gonsalves's ULP, at least during the 2001 election that brought it to power (ref C). In Wickham's assessment, Gonsalves has to appear to be doing just enough to tackle marijuana production to satisfy the USG and CARICOM member states. "Vincentian ganja is a big thing" in the Caribbean, said Wickham, who believes that it is difficult for the Government of St. Vincent to crack down on one of the country's few lucrative industries.

St. Lucia Politics Up in the Air

¶8. (C) St. Lucia Prime Minister Kenny Anthony is hard to read; his comments during political strategy sessions amount to little and it is unclear how engaged the PM is, in Wickham's assessment of another of his clients. Wickham offered that the current political situation in St. Lucia, where a Member of Parliament who represented a small third party recently resigned her seat, is very unsettled. The MP had intended her resignation as a means to force PM Anthony to call a national election earlier than it is constitutionally due in December 2006. Anthony declined to do so, but his ruling party could look weak if the opposition United Workers' Party, led by former Prime Minister John Compton, wins the by-election that must be held by April to determine who will fill the empty parliamentary seat. The outcome could have a significant impact on the upcoming national election.

Biographic Information

¶9. (U) Peter Wickham is the Director of Caribbean Development Research Services, Inc. (CADRES), a Barbados-based consulting firm specializing in public opinion polling. Among CADRES's clients are a variety of corporations, international organizations, and media outlets. Wickham is best known for his work as a political consultant, conducting polls for governments and political parties throughout the Caribbean. CADRES recently opened an office in Trinidad and will soon begin working in Guyana. Wickham identifies himself as a liberal and his clients are typically labor parties. He says, however, that it is preferable to work for ruling parties, regardless of ideology, because they tend to pay their bills. Wickham is also a political commentator who appears on TV and radio in Barbados and writes a weekly column for the "Nation," the country's leading newspaper. He completed his bachelor's (Political Science and Law, with honors, 1990) and master's (Political Science, 1993) degrees at the University of the West Indies, where he also served as a Liaison Officer for the University of California's Education Abroad Program. The affable Wickham has met periodically with Emboffs over the past several years to offer his views on a variety of issues.

¶10. (C) Comment: The increasing availability of campaign funds to Caribbean political leaders, combined with a lack of legal control over how the money is raised, makes for a troubling situation in a region where many turn a blind eye to corruption. A few hundred thousand dollars, a pittance to a wealthy businessperson in Barbados or the Cayman Islands, could buy a great deal of influence in one of the small, economically troubled countries in the region. Some of this influence may be purchased to further legitimate business concerns, but as in the case of marijuana growers, or even the bearers of passports to which they are not entitled, the influence could be used for more nefarious purposes. End comment.
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